

## "Children of Light"

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*<sup>8</sup>For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—<sup>9</sup>for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. <sup>10</sup>Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. <sup>11</sup>Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. <sup>12</sup>For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; <sup>13</sup>but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, <sup>14</sup>for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."  
(Ephesians 5:8-14)*

Back in my Scouting days, I remember a backpacking trip when we got a late start. By the time we arrived at the trailhead, the sun was already setting. We only had about two miles to hike in before we set up our camp, but we were going to have to do everything that needed to be done that night -- hike in, set up our tents, cook dinner -- in the dark. As we were putting on our backpacks, I remember our Scoutmaster telling us that the best thing we could do would be to resist the temptation to use our flashlights. "There is plenty of light out here," he said. "Your eyes will adjust if you just gave it a minute."

To our twelve year old brains, this idea was so cute. Sure, our Scoutmaster had ice-climbed Mount Ranier, but he clearly did not grasp this situation. After all, we were drawing on a full dozen years of life experience, which included several years of flashlight training. It is a well-known fact that, in the world of Scouting, agility in flashlight usage is an art second only to setting stuff on fire. We knew flashlights, and we knew the facts. We had hiked this trail before, so we knew it was littered rocks and roots and other tripping hazards. We all had good flashlights with fresh batteries. It seemed crazy not to use them. As we headed out onto the trail, with our handheld lights in full blaze, we imagined that this would be the first lesson in a new "Flashlight Management" merit badge that we would create. If our experienced Scoutmaster was making such a rookie mistake, clearly the world needed our wisdom.

Our Scoutmaster said nothing. He just led the way, with his flashlight securely stowed away in his pack.

For the first mile, we did not make good time. In one sense, our flashlights worked. We could see the trail ahead of us. But those little lights only illuminated a very small area directly in front of us. Beyond that little area, we were essentially blind. It was nearly impossible to see anything outside of the little beam of light we carried in our hands.

After a while, our Scoutmaster stopped. "How are those flashlights working out for you all?" he asked. "What do you think about trying it my way for a while?"

"Trust me," he continued, "there is more light than you think."

Miraculously, this time, we listened. We had walked long enough to see that our plan had some flaws. So we put the lights away. As soon as we did, some new things began to come into view – things that had been true all along. For example, we realized for the first time that it was a clear night. The sky was full of stars, but at the trailhead we had been too preoccupied to notice. And then there was the moon. It was far from full, but the sliver was still reflecting a considerable amount of light. By the time we put our lights away and started walking again, we realized that we could see. Not completely clearly, but we could see the things that we needed to see – the things that could trip us up.

The most amazing part was what we could see beyond the small circle of our own footsteps. Before, our eyes had been fixed squarely on the ground, because we had to watch diligently for the tripping hazards that would suddenly burst into the little circle of our flashlight beams. But now, with our artificial lights stowed away, our eyes were opened beyond that little circle. Now, we could see on up the trail. We saw it winding up the hillside, gently climbing the mountain in front of us. To our left and right, we could see the outline of the trees. Above us, we could appreciate the brilliance of the stars – beholding them in the glory that can only be seen when you are far away from the lights of human settlement. There wasn't a lot of light, but there was enough... more than enough for us to see not only the path in front of us, but much of the world around us.

*“For once you were darkness,”* Ephesians tells us, *“but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light.”* It sounds great, but we know too much to assume that this is an easy task. In the night, there seems to be more darkness than light. In the night, it is easier to feel the darkness. And that means it is easier for us to react to the darkness, to respond to the darkness, to *live* in the darkness. Fortunately, this little text lights our path in some very helpful ways. Specifically, I see in this text three clues about living as children of the light.

1. The first clue about living as children of light is to ***remember that we do not generate this light***. As twelve year olds on that trail, we looked out into the darkness and assumed we had to bring our own light. We figured that, if we wanted to keep from falling, we would have to create some light for ourselves.

It is not just twelve year old night hikers that make this mistake. Disciples of Christ are still doing it. We sense the darkness, and it scares us... all the bad things that could happen... all the things that could trip us up or sneak up on us in the night. We sense we need some light to push those bad things away. So, in our spirits, we pull out some hypothetical sticks and we start rubbing them together like mad. We work and work and work to generate some heat... to start some kind of a spark... to kindle something in ourselves that is more righteous, more forgiving, more loving.

The thing is, we do not have to generate the kind of light Ephesians is talking about. That light is already there. It has been there all along. We don't have to bring the light, this scripture says, because *“in the Lord, you are the light.”* We are the light simply because Christ has already said *“I am the light of the world, [that] whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life”* (John 8:12). When we are in Christ, when our lives is connected to his, something happens to us. We do not make it happen in ourselves. We do not muster it from within, because Christ has already done it. It is Christ who creates the light, and Christ who maintains the light. It is always there. It has never left. And so we are reminded here, *“Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”* The first key to living as children of light is to be at peace, because we do not have to generate our own light.

2. That being said, the second clue to living as children of the light is that we do have to walk. We are called to struggle our way up the trail, even in the darkness. This is how Ephesians puts it: *“Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.”* The idea is that we are kind of feeling our way in the dark, right? We do have to try and walk the path as best we can, and we have to do so with limited knowledge.

One of my favorite prayers is by Thomas Merton, and I have shared it with you before. It begins *“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so...”* Isn't that the truth? Most of us

want to do the right thing. We want to walk in the light. But most of us, even on a good day, have not a single, solitary clue about how to do it. Our sin and brokenness leaves us groping in the dark in our attempts to be obedient.

Even so, this scripture calls us to walk. We may have limited sight, but we hike anyway. Now, we see only in part, as through a mirror darkly, but we are still called to be faithful. "*Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord,*" Ephesians says. We have to do what we can, with limited vision, to see what Christ is already doing around us.

When people come to me in difficulty, if they are depressed, or overwhelmed, or angry, I often ask them, "Can you see any shafts of light -- in a person, a cause, or a project? Is there anything in your scope of vision that seems good, or pure, or right?" And if they say yes, I urge them to go toward that light, to grope their way to it as best they can, to seek "*what is pleasing to the Lord.*" If Christ seems to be doing something in our city, we can speak up about it. If the light of Christ has revealed a dark or dangerous corner, we can help expose it. We remember always that we are not generating light in any of these things. We are only bathing in its warmth. To be children of light means to be drawn to the light of Christ, wherever it may be, whatever it may be doing.

3. Finally, and most importantly, to live as children of the light we have to trust that the light really is there.

Kate Braestrup spends most of her time as the chaplain for the wildlife wardens in the State of Maine. You might imagine that, from time to time, game wardens and park rangers encounter some pretty dark situations. People get hurt in the wilderness, and people die in the wilderness, and rangers are usually the first responders in these times. During one of those very dark times, an uncle's ATV accidentally flipped over onto a much littler machine being driven by his nephew. Four-year old Andy was killed instantly. The wardens took his body to the closest morgue as the family tried to come to grips with the worst pain that they could imagine. Chaplain Kate stayed very close.

The next day, Andy's aunt and uncle came to see Kate. A new wrinkle had been added to their deep grief. Their daughter Nina, who was only five, wanted to see her cousin's body. She wanted to venture, very willingly, into darkness that we adults go to considerable lengths to avoid. The parents were consumed, overwhelmed, knocked senseless by this darkness, and they could not imagine letting their young daughter go in. But in her years of chaplaincy, and especially through the tragic death of her own husband, Kate Braestrup had learned that human beings can be trusted with grief, as long as it is honest grief. "I think it will be OK," she told the parents. "You know your daughter, you know what is best for her, but I think it will be OK."

Reluctantly, the parents figured that it would be better to honor Nina's request than to open the door for future regret. Still, they tried their best to prepare her for the darkness she was about to encounter, darkness that they feared she may not appreciate until it was too late.

"You know, Nina, Andy is not going to be able to talk to you."

"Yep," she said.

"And you know that he isn't going to be able to stand up or walk or move or even open his eyes."

"Yes, yes," she said. "Can we go in now?"

When they walked into the room, Andy's little body was lying alone on a central table. It was covered with the quilt his mother had made for him when he was a baby. Approaching the table, Nina walked all around Andy's body. She took his hand, and put her head down on his chest, and she just started talking to him. She chatted away like this for ten minutes. By this

time, Nina's mother was a tearful mess. The pain was overwhelming her. "OK, Nina, are you ready to go now?"

"No," she said, "but I'll tell you when I am." Nina brushed Andy's hair back on his forehead and began to sing to him. When she finished her song, she reached into her little backpack and pulled out Andy's yellow Fisher Price telescope. She put the toy gently into his cold hands. "Here you go, Andy. Now you can see anything you want to see from heaven."

Then she turned to her parents. "I'm ready to go now, but Andy's not going to be getting up, so I have to tuck him in." Nina walked all the way around the table, tucking Andy in very carefully as she went.

As she turned to go, she leaned over his face and said "I love you, Andy Dandy. Goodbye."<sup>1</sup>

When Kate Braestrup teaches new wardens and rangers about confronting death and darkness, she tells them this: "Walk fearlessly into the house of mourning, for grief is only love that has come up against its oldest challenge. And after all these mortal years, love knows how to handle it."<sup>2</sup> To walk as children of light is to always trust that the light of Christ is present, even when it is not easy to see. It is to believe that this light shines in the darkness, that it is always there to light the path ahead, and that the darkness will never overcome it.

*"For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light."*

Know that you do not have to generate this light for yourself.

Know that, even in darkness, you can grope your way towards it.

And have faith that the light of Christ will always be there... to illuminate the world around us, and to reveal the beauty that is always around us, if we will just trust that it really is there.

**Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Braestrup, The Moth Radio Hour, "Facing the Dark." <https://beta.prx.org/stories/199389?play=true>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.